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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: KUWAITI ACADEMICS SHARE VIEWS ON
DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN KUWAIT

Sensitive But Unclassified; not for Internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Kuwaiti academics shared their views on democratic development in Kuwait with visiting American professor Dr. Michael Herb during an April 2 reception. Overall, they were cynical about Herb's argument that Kuwait was in the process of transitioning from a monarchy to a parliamentary democracy. The academics highlighted a number of obstacles to democratization in Kuwait, including oil, tribalism, religion, and lack of government accountability. However, while disagreeing on the surface with Herb's argument, they seemed to implicitly accept his two principle points: 1) that Kuwait's political system is unique in the region and 2) that it is in the process, however imperfect, of becoming more representative of and responsible to the Kuwaiti people. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) PolChief hosted a reception April 2 during which a number of Kuwaiti academics engaged in an impassioned exchange on the prospects of democratic development in Kuwait with visiting American professor Dr. Michael Herb, an expert on comparative politics and Kuwait's political system. Herb argued that Kuwaiti politics were unique in the region and there was a possibility for a peaceful transition from absolute monarchy to real democracy, a process he believed Kuwait had already begun. The Kuwaiti academics, ranging from liberal to Islamist, expressed varying degrees of cynicism about this analysis. Dr. Abdullah Al-Shayji, the Chairman of the American Studies Department at Kuwait University, argued that democratic change in Kuwait required amending the Constitution to allow for more elected parliamentarians and, consequently, more appointed ministers and to institute a system of taxation. "In Kuwait, we have 'Representation without Taxation'," he said, which meant that the government was not accountable to the people. In his view, this prevented meaningful democratic change.

¶3. (SBU) Dr. Shamlan Al-Issa, the Director of the Center for Strategic and Future Studies at Kuwait University and a staunch liberal, said the majority of the political groups in Kuwait were not truly committed to secular, democratic governance. He said until this changed, he "(did) not trust the people" to govern the country. Al-Issa claimed oil was the ultimate source of the ruling family's political legitimacy and predicted that as long as the price of oil remained above \$60 per barrel Kuwait would not make the transition to a more democratic government. Dr. Ayed Al-Manna, a liberal professor at Arab Open University, expressed a similar opinion, arguing that until religiously-oriented political groups accepted the principles of secularism and pluralism democracy could not flourish in the country. Ahmed Sarraf, a prominent liberal columnist, agreed. According to him, there were three obstacles to democratic development in Kuwait: oil, lack of planning, and religion.

¶4. (SBU) Dr. Abdul Reda Assiri, the liberal Chairman of the Political Science Department at Kuwait University, argued that the ruling family ensured Kuwait's stability and served as a valuable arbitrator between domestic groups with divergent interests. Ultimately, he said, Kuwaitis valued the ruling family's political leadership and did not want to see a system in which they were completely marginalized. As evidence, Assiri noted that Kuwaitis had had the chance to press for a different system of government after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, but chose to stick with the Al-Sabah leadership.

¶5. (SBU) Dr. Mohammed Al-Moqataei, a professor of Constitutional Law at Kuwait University and an Islamist, agreed with Herb that Kuwait's constitution was unique in the region and could conceivably allow for a transition to a more democratic form of government without being amended. The provisions of the constitution just need to be enforced, he argued. Al-Moqataei responded to the liberal academics' criticism of Islamist groups' commitment to democracy by stressing that liberals also needed to accept the principle they always accused Islamist groups of rejecting: pluralism. For democracy to succeed in Kuwait, every political group, regardless of its ideological leanings, must accept the constitution as its ultimate guide and adhere to its provisions, he said. Like the other academics, though, Al-Moqataei did not believe the Prime Minister's recent consultations with political blocs prior to forming the new Cabinet represented a significant change in the Kuwaiti leadership's approach towards Parliament, as argued by Herb.

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